

SANTA MONICA MOUNTAINS CONSERVANCY

STREISAND CENTER FOR CONSERVANCY STUDIES
5730 RAMIREZ CANYON ROAD
MALIBU, CALIFORNIA 90263
(310) 589-3200
FAX (310) 589-3207



VIA FACSIMILE

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Los Angeles County Regional Planning Commission
320 West Temple Street
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Newhall Ranch Development Agreement

Dear Commissioners:

The Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy has already commented extensively on the Newhall Ranch Specific Plan and Draft Environmental Impact Report. As you may recall, our primary concern was, and continues to be, the disposition of the large open space acreage in the High Country Sensitive Management Area (SMA). The Conservancy feels strongly that the nearly 4000- acre High Country must be dedicated to a public agency for the assurance of permanence of the open space and timely public recreational access.

The Development Agreement does not address this concern; in fact, it appears that the Newhall Ranch Company is resistant to any public involvement other than a token assignment of a conservation easement to the County. A key question regarding the Development Agreement should be this:

What benefit is Newhall Ranch giving to the County and the public in the Development Agreement above and beyond what is in the Specific Plan, in exchange for the approval of the Specific Plan, and the Vesting Tentative Tract Map, among other approvals?

What then are the significant benefits under the Development Agreement in exchange for the great value Newhall would receive in protection against changes in County policies for 30 years, and an automatic 10 year extension of subdivision maps? The case is currently not very compelling that the public truly receives a tangible, timely benefit.

Although the Development Agreement restates the supposed public benefit of the private dedication of the High Country SMA, we believe that this agreement, likewise the Specific Plan, fails to adequately ensure public oversight of management and access to the High Country Area. In fact, while promoting that the dedication of the High Country Area is a significant public benefit because it provides public access and recreation opportunities, the Development Agreement provides nothing to guarantee that this outcome will occur given the very lengthy transfer time frame, the currently designated private entity, and the various reversionary rights in the agreement between Newhall and the Center for Natural Lands Management (CNLM).

Throughout Article 2: **PUBLIC BENEFITS**, the Development Agreement makes vague benefit claims similar or identical to the Specific Plan, without specific triggers or mechanisms to ensure they actually

will occur. For instance, in Section 2.1.14: Dedication of the High Country, the dedication is the same as in the Specific Plan and is far too long in coming. Although it is one of the major public benefits cited, its dedication could be more than 15 years away, and is tied to litigation. Also, in Section 2.1.15: Visitor Center, the agreement states that access to the High Country will be provided by a Visitor Center at the same time as dedication of the High Country to the private CNLM. There is no mention of connections to county trails or to the 3500-acre Santa Clarita Woodlands Park managed by the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, which lies immediately adjacent to Newhall's High Country SMA.

Perhaps most ironic is the public benefit offered in Section 2.1.19: Contiguous Open Space. This section states that Newhall's plan for preservation and management of the High Country SMA *will augment an area of preserved dedicated open space which will . . . extend ten miles from Interstate 5 to the Los Angeles/Ventura County boundary*. So on the one hand contiguous, accessible, publicly owned and protected parkland available for appropriate public use is touted as a good thing. Exactly our point. But the other private half of this potential "contiguous open space benefit" would not occur until the *next generation*. Even then, the implementation and the degree of public access is left largely to Newhall Ranch and its private non-profit organization's discretion, with little or no practical public oversight.

The Development Agreement and the Specific Plan fail to acknowledge the public agencies which currently manage the public parklands. Nor does the Development Agreement mention how the neighboring park area has both preservation and public recreational opportunities, and how--or if--the High Country SMA will be integrated with the Conservancy's Woodlands Park. This failure to spell out, and guarantee the integration of these adjacent areas leaves the possibility that the High Country SMA will not adequately meet the public access and recreation promises contained in the Specific Plan and the Development Agreement.

Additionally, under Section 2.1.24: Trails, the High Country trails will not be dedicated until three years after dedication of the SMA. Trails can and should be open much sooner than what is contemplated in the Development Agreement, under a license agreement with a public agency which would also protect the landowner's uses, if need be.

In sum, the Commission should require as one of the public benefits listed in the Development Agreement a public dedication of the High Country SMA, with appropriate timing of phases, upon approval of the Specific Plan. The Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, one of its affiliated joint powers agencies, or the City of Santa Clarita would be appropriate designees.

Sincerely,



JOSEPH T. EDMISTON, AICP
Executive Director